

Legislature commends drug courts and graduates

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Rep. Alyce Griffin Clarke of Jackson told her legislative colleagues Friday that the state's 38 drug courts save lives, families and tax dollars.

She showed them some living proof.

Heather Adams Bond, 38, of Pascagoula, told the legislators, "I can honestly say if it wasn't for drug court, I would probably be dead."

Bond, who admits she fought treatment when she landed in the 19th Circuit Drug Court, put her own life back together, then went to work helping other addicts with their struggles. Bond, a drug court case manager, supervises 71 participants in the same drug court from which she graduated in 2006.

More than 50 drug court participants, drug court staff and judges from across the state were on the floor of the House of Representatives Friday as House resolutions were read commending the state's drug court programs and the 1,583 people who have graduated since 2004, when statistics began being kept.

Rep. Clarke, a pioneer of the drug court movement, asked fellow legislators to push for creation of more programs in counties which do not have drug courts. Currently, 67 counties have a drug court at some level.

Expanding the reach of drug courts is a priority, said Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr. He said that drug courts have the most impact of any program in the justice system.

"I want to see drug courts established statewide, with programs operating at all levels of the justice system," Chief Justice Waller said.

The state's 38 certified drug court program include 17 adult felony programs in circuit courts, 14 juvenile programs, five misdemeanor level programs, and two family treatment court pilot programs in Adams and Rankin counties. The family court programs help troubled families remain drug-free and keep custody of their children. The two newest drug courts, in the Harrison County Youth Court and the 16th Circuit Court of Clay, Oktibbeha, Lowndes and Noxubee counties, are expected to begin admitting participants later this year.

More than 2,600 people are currently enrolled in drug court programs statewide, said State Drug Court Coordinator Joey Craft.

Circuit Judge Betty W. Sanders of Greenwood thanked legislators for funding drug court programs and asked for their continued support. "The financial stability you have given us allows us to impact lives, not only of the participants but also the community," she said. Drug court participants not only remain drug-free, but are employed, support families, and are involved in community activities.

Some of the drug court graduates who rebuilt their lives under the programs' supervision have gone on to help others who still struggle with addiction. Bond and several others told legislators about working in drug treatment and related services.

Laura Smith, 48, of Jackson, is house managing supervisor at New Life for Women, a drug treatment center. She started work there as a volunteer while receiving treatment under

the supervision of the Hinds County Drug Court. “Drug Courts work,” she said. “I couldn’t be sober today if it was not for Drug Court and New Life for Women.”

Sarah Johnson, 46, of Jackson, also a Hinds County Drug Court graduate, is transition coordinator at New Life for Women. Johnson said the drug court program’s intensive supervision backed up by the threat of jail made her stay in treatment long enough to get clean and stay that way. “Ninety days in treatment (alone) wouldn’t have done this dope fiend any good because I had been out there for 21 years,” Johnson said.

Randy Adams, 44, a graduate of the Hinds County Drug Court, is admissions director at Common Bond Recovery Center in Jackson. “I would like to thank the Hinds County Drug Court for seeing me as more than a criminal,” Adams told the legislators.

Greg Morgan, 53, of Jackson, handles security at Stewpot Community Services. He started working there as a volunteer while under the supervision of the Hinds County Drug Court. Alcoholics and drug addicts are among the destitute people who look to Stewpot ministries for hot meals, groceries, clothing and shelter. Morgan understands their plight, because he’s been there too. When he has an opportunity to offer guidance, “The best way I have been able to be effective is by example.”

Rep. Clarke told drug court graduates and staff that the drug court concept wasn’t popular in the beginning. She feels immense satisfaction at its progress. “It is working so well and saving so many lives.”

Rep. Clarke is lead author of House Resolution 86 commending drug court graduates for their live-changing efforts. Forty-six other Representatives signed on as sponsors of HR 86 when it was adopted by the House on Thursday, March 24.

She authored a separate bill, House Resolution 81, “recognizing and commending the Mississippi Drug Court program and congratulating its success in saving lives and saving money for the taxpayers of the state of Mississippi.”

HR 81 said, in part, “Whereas, the most important benefit afforded by drug courts is that graduating participants gain the necessary tools to rebuild their lives; yet, also important to the success of the program is the savings to the taxpayers of the State of Mississippi, with estimates showing that the drug courts save the state \$100,000 each day.”

The Administrative Office of Courts in a report to the Legislature in January estimated that savings produced by drug courts include:

- \$32 million saved annually in incarceration costs. While the average cost of incarceration was \$15,235 per inmate during FY 2010, it costs less than \$2,000 a year to intensely supervise an individual in a drug court program.
- \$54 million saved annually in health care costs;
- \$1.7 million in fines and fees collected annually and returned to counties;
- 200 babies born to drug-free mothers enrolled in drug courts since 2004.

Drug court participants undergo long-term treatment and counseling. Frequent court appearances, periodic drug testing, intense supervision and a system of sanctions and incentives force participants to refrain from drug use. Drug courts help participants develop skills to support themselves and their families. Participants must get and keep a job, pay

their fines, and many do community service work. They have to work toward obtaining a General Education Development (GED) degree if they dropped out of school.

The state's first drug court was started in Ridgeland Municipal Court in 1995. The first felony adult drug court was founded in 1999 in the 14th Circuit District of Lincoln, Pike and Walthall counties. Legislation enacted in 2003 established a framework for drug courts statewide. The statute is known as the Alyce Griffin Clarke Drug Court Act, in honor of Clarke's pioneering work to establish drug courts.

Copies of HR 81 and HR 86 are available at these links:
<http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2011/pdf/history/HR/HR0081.xml> and
<http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/2011/pdf/history/HR/HR0086.xml>.

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